The Problem of Evil

Why Does God Allow All this Evil to Happen?!

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The problem of evil is the atheists' most centric argument. In many debates when an atheist is cornered and immensely bombarded with multitude of -God's existence- logical proofs and prior to throwing in the towel, he shifts to the problem of evil argument hoping to avail him in his position.

Anthony Flew, a famous atheist, who preached atheism for more than half a century and later believed in God's existence, admitted: "One of those early reasons for my conversion to atheism is the problem of evil"[1]. Sadly, we see this argument disseminating among the Muslim youth and causing disturbance to some. On the contrary, we see the average learned Muslim simply knows how to easily debunk this fallacious argument. This article is a contribution in this regard.

We ought to bear in mind that this argument is based on showing discontent with God's actions or not understanding the divine wisdom. Hence, it should never back fire against the vividly substantiated proofs of God's existence. God's existence is absolutely a different topic and realm than God's actions, where each one has its own substantiated arguments. To address them both as one subject is a red herring; an attempt by the atheist to divert the argument to a different topic hoping to find a better argument to support his position, while leaving God's existence proofs untouched.

Simply, he is declaring that: I'm not satisfied with God's actions, therefore He does not exist! Which is tantamount to a child showing dissatisfaction with his dad's behavior and comes to a conclusion that: "You are not my dad"!

The evil's problem is an ancient argument, which was philosophically manifested by Epicurus (died 270 BC). And here is his pretension:

If God wills to prevent evil, and He is able to, then why is there evil?

If He wills to prevent evil, but He is not able to, then He is not omnipotent.

If He does not will to prevent evil, and He is able to, then He is malevolent (evil).

If He does not will to prevent evil, and He is not able to, then why call Him God?

Based on these premises he concluded that there is no god!

Well, here is how to tackle this fallacy and the problem of evil from several perspectives:

1. You can see that Epicurus assumed that a capable person, who has a complete will to prevent evil, always should not allow evil of any degree to happen. Of course, this is a barefaced fallacy, where he managed to ignore that a person may allow a degree of evil to happen for a wisdom. In real, a person who hates evil and capable of stopping it may willingly allow –for sound reasons- evil to take place. To simplify the issue, here is an example from reality. A father willingly carries his own child to a surgeon to perform an open heart surgery. Here, both the father and the surgeon collaborated in doing this evil. Apparently, this evil was deliberately done to prevent a greater one. Thus, no sane person will question or deny the father's and the doctor's behavior or accuse them of being ruthless.

So, at the human level Epicurus' argument is proven to be unsound; thus at the divine level it is deemed to be fallacious and incoherent. Especially when we see that this argument is targeted at the All-Wise, Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnibenevolent Creator.

2. Logically, the one who created this intricate and perfect universe must possess the absolute all-perfect attributes. Among these attributes must be knowledge, wisdom, ability, mercy, justice and others. Apparently, there is no comparison – non what so ever- between the attributes of the all-perfect and all-complete Creator and that of the weak, mortal, wise-less and powerless human being. So, is it wise or rational to have the less-wise, incompetent and less knowledgeable interrogating the actions of the All-Wise, Omnipotent and Omniscient Creator?

Allah, the Glorified, said: (Then is He who creates like one who does not create? So will you not be reminded) (Noble Qur'āh 16:17)

Here is a parable to simplify the issue and to Allāh belongs the best of all examples. When a young child is informed that a surgeon amputated the foot of his own baby brother, what do you think his reaction would be? Of course, this poor child will talk to every person he meets how cruel and evil this doctor is. What he saw -according to his limited knowledge- left no room for any expected goodness. No matter how much effort his father spares to justify the matter, it may not be comprehensible to this sorrowed child.

3. If we compare the amount of evil to that of goodness, we would see that there is no comparison. The vast goodness which we enjoy in every aspect of our life patently verifies how minimal evil is. In fact evil is deemed a rare exception; without goodness we would not recognize what evil is. Thus, we ought to ask ourselves, who is the reason behind all goodness, which we enjoy and experience in this life? This profound question when

presented openly before every atheist and agnostic to answer, sadly we always see them avert to a different topic rather than answering it.

Allah, the Exalted, said about good and evil: (Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned.) (Noble Qur'an 21:35)

4. When we talk about evil and pain, we really need to reflect upon these wondrous delicate senses built within every human being, which makes him not only feel and realize the slightest pain but rather react accordingly. Imagine, You are about to touch a harmful surface and before you notice a signal is sent to the brain, through a forest of complex neural network, and before you realize the instruction comes to your hand and immediately you lift it.

We need to ask ourselves who is the sole cause for these senses? And do we realize that to feel pain is actually a blessing and a great favor bestowed upon us from God. Dr. Sami Aamri[2] quoted from the book "The Gift of Pain"[3], where the entire book content exclusively emphasizes its title. Bran said: "and now I look at pain as one of the greatest amazing features for designing the human body. And if I were to choose a gift for the lepers it would have been pain. In fact, I supervised a scientific team, who spent one million dollars to attempt to design an engineering system for pain. We have neglected the project when it became apparent that we could not design a complex engineering system to protect humans."[4]

Brand said in a different occasion: "I thank God for inventing pain. And I do not think He did anything better than that."[5] He also said: "If I held in my hands the power to eliminate physical pain from the world, I would not exercise it"[6]

5. It is observable that many of the caused evil stem from man. Hence, God should not be blamed for. More people die from smoking than car accidents; and more people die because of wars than natural disasters. God created man with free will and the only mean to prevent man from doing evil is to deprive him of his free will, which defies the purpose of man's creation. Human compliance with God's instructions presupposes that we have free will. God meant to create us with free will; He exclusively gave us the ability to determine; and He placed regulations and warned immensely against violating them. He, the exalted, said: (These are the limits of Allāh, so do not transgress them. And whoever transgresses the limits of Allāh –those who are the wrongdoers.) (Noble Qur'ān 2: 229).

But as for the evil we see in natural disasters such as earth quakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, plagues and the like, we know that God allowed it to happen for a reason and there is definitely goodness behind it, whether it was observable to us or not. We ought to understand that when God created this world, it was not intend to be free from evil. He, the Exalted, declared clearly that this life is full of trials.

Allāh, the exalted, said: (He who created death and life to test you which of you is best in deed) (Noble Qur'ān 67:2).

And the real life, which is free from any level of evil, that we ought to strive for is in not on earth rather it is in paradise. God prepared paradise for those who obeyed Him in this life and followed His final message revealed to his Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

6. If you compare between the people who are afflicted with calamities to those who are not, we observe the afflicted ones perpetually hasten in repentance to God, expressing their need for Him and showing complete submission and abidance to His guidance. Unlike those who are indulged in the beauty of this worldly life and lured by its infatuations, who are not afflicted by any degree of tribulations, we see them taking everything for granted and not paying attention to God's commands and legislation. Practically, trials always bring people back to God.

7. From an atheistic perspective, the greatest thing evil can lead to is death. After all, what an atheist apologist is trying to convey is: why does not God create us without death?

In other word, he wants an eternal life on earth.

We say to him: Can you realize a small planet -such as ours- with creatures, which procreate and do not die since the beginning of time? Imagine all the insects, germs, bacteria, fish, reptiles, birds, domestic and wild animals, human beings, etc. never die! I do not think that this world would be a pleasant place for us to live in.

Read the following real story to get the full picture; Dr. Sultan Alomairi quoted[7] John's Clover Monsma book[8] that John William Klonz, a genetic and environmental scientist, mentioned when the first immigrants arrived to Australia; they missed their hoppy of rabbit hunting. So, as an attempt to develop the environment a man brought twelve pairs of rabbits and released them there. The rabbits did not have any natural predator so they multiplied rapidly, and that lead to a measure environmental disorder. The rabbits ravaged all the green lands, which are grazed by the herds of sheep. The locals spared so much effort to control the rabbits, but to no avail. They built fences across the continent in Queensland almost 7000 miles long, but still no success. They used poisonous food and still no success. Finally they came up with a special deadly virus to eradicate the rabbits and they succeeded to an extent. Later, the prairie and mountains turned green again.

This is to proof that life and death have purpose and the ecological system balance serves the interest of our existence.

The true eternal life, which is free from evil -that you are asking for-, God will make it happen not on earth rather it is going to be in the hereafter. So, work hard to make it to there.

Allāh, the Exalted, said: (And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord and a garden as wide as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous (133) Who spend [in the cause of Allāh] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people and Allāh loves the doers of good;(134) And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allāh and seek forgiveness for their sins - and who can forgive sins except Allāh? - and [who] do not persist in what they have done while they know. (135) Those - their reward is forgiveness from their Lord and gardens beneath which rivers flow [in Paradise], wherein they will abide eternally; and excellent is the reward of the [righteous] workers.(136)) (Noble Qur'āh 3:133-136)

8. When people die in a war or a natural disaster, then the one who dies deemed to be one of three:

First: He is either a devoted righteous person; therefore, this is the most perfect time for him to die in. God knows, if he had lived longer he could not have been as much good and righteous as when he died. So, God wanted him to die in his greatest state of belief.

Additionally, any harm, which afflicts him and he bares patience, God makes it as an expiation for whatever sins he has committed.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: (No calamity befalls a Muslim but that Allāh expiates some of his sins because of it, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn.) (Al-Bukhary and Muslim)

Second: He could be a Muslim who is indulged in sins and God knows if he lived longer, he could have become more evil. Thus, this is the best time for him to die in, in order to meet God with lesser sins.

Third: Or, he could be a disbeliever or an evil person and God knows if he had lived longer, he would not get any better, so his death is a relief for the community from his evil.

And if you read the story of Prophet Moses and Al-Khadir (peace be upon them) at the end of Chapter 18 (The Cave 60-82), it will clear many of the misconceptions related to the issue of Allāh's actions, decree, and wisdom.

In brief, in this story Allāh (the Exalted & Glorified) commanded Moses (PBUH) to accompany Al-Khadir in order to gain more knowledge and realize God's wisdom. Al-Khadir did three things before he explained to Moses (PBUH) what he did.

First, both of them rode a ship owned by poor people; Al-Khadir went on and started wrecking part of the ship. Second, both saw a young child playing, Al-Khadir went on and killed him. Finally, both arrived to a village and they asked the villagers for food and they refused to offer them any hospitality. Surprisingly, Al-Khadir went on and started

rebuilding a collapsing wall on the skirt of the village. And of course after every incident Moses would blame Al-Khadir.

Later Al-Khadir explained to Moses (PBUH) why he did what he did. He said: as for the ship it was owned by poor people, who did not have other means of provision; and there was a tyrant king sailing the ocean looking for good ships, whenever he finds one he seizes it for himself. So, I wrecked part of the ship to make him lose interest in it.

As for the boy, his parents were righteous and I feared that if he grew up he would overburden them by transgression and disbelief. So killing the child was for the goodness of the entire family in this life and the hereafter. Because of that, the parents remained believers and the child died as a believer too. And God granted them a child better than the killed one.

As for the wall, it was owned by two orphans. Their father was a righteous man. And if the wall collapses the treasure, which their father's hid, will be revealed to the villagers and the boys may lose it. So Allāh commanded me to rebuild the wall so when they grow up they can extract it themselves.

In this story what Moses (PBUH) saw deemed to be absolute evil, but after Al-Khadir clarified the motive behind what he did, Moses (PBUH) understood the wisdom and was pleased with the outcome.

We learn from this story that God's wisdom may not be evident to us. And what deemed to be evil ended up being the best and most wise action to take place.

Therefore, we must bear in mind that we cannot be more merciful, wise or knowledgeable than God, the Exalted.

Umar ibn Al-khatab (RAA) reported: Some prisoners were brought to Messenger of Allāh (PBUH) amongst whom there was a woman who was running (searching for her child). When she saw a child among the captives, she took hold of it, pressed it against her belly and gave it a suck. Messenger of Allāh (PBUH) said, "Do you think this woman would ever throw her child in fire?" We said, "By Allāh, she would never throw the child in fire." Thereupon Messenger of Allāh (PBUH) said, "Verily, Allāh is more merciful to his slave than this woman is to her child". (Al-Bukhary and Muslim)

9. We ask the atheist, who in every occasion argues about evil when confronted by believers, from your atheistic perspective what is your view of the evil committed by man. Especially, those who were the major cause for massive eradication of human beings? Who will hold them accountable for all these atrocities? Do you claim: "Hitler and Stalin just died and that's it"?! Is it fair to imagine life without reckoning after death? No matter how angel good or devil evil one is, when they die -in the atheistic materialistic

perspective- both are equal. Do you realize how devastating the outcome of denying reckoning after death would be? This will definitely lead to a utilitarian self-centric selfish life, in which everything orbits around ones self-interest. Even if it were on the cost of violating the rights and interest of others. Especially in the absence of law enforcement nothing can stop an atheist from doing whatever he wishes to do.

It is obvious that the only motive for enjoining the good and forbidding evil, is accepting the fact that there is reckoning. Without that life will have no objective value or moral and the law of jungle will prevail especially in the absence of law enforcement.

10. Finally, we ought to remember that the divine perfection presupposes the negation of any injustice. Allāh, the Exalted and Glorified, said: (Indeed, Allāh does not do injustice, [even] as much as an atom's (ant) weight; while if there is a good deed, He multiplies it and gives from Himself a great reward.) (Noble Qur'āh 4:40)

As a conclusion, a fair and rational intellectual should always bear in mind the following principles when intellectually discussing such topic:

1. This universe must have a Creator and the evidences for that are robust, coherent, logical, innate and –until as of today- not refuted and will never be.
2. God's permission for evil to occur does not negate God's wisdom or existence.
3. Logically, human minds admit that the Creator of the universe must possess the Absolute All-Perfect attributes. Hence, there is no chance of ascribing lack of knowledge, wisdom, mercy or ability to God.
4. The issue that the Creator is free from committing any injustice should always be prominent.
5. Can the less knowledgeable incompetent human being interrogate the One who is the cause of his existence, the absolutely Perfect everlasting flawless Creator?!
6. We can never encompass God's decree, knowledge or wisdom, no matter how much we strive. Read the story of Moses with Al-Khadir (PBUT) at the end of Chapter 18 of the Qur'ān.
7. God intentionally and for a wisdom made this life full of trials and those who pass this trial shall enjoy an eternal bliss in paradise.
8. God gave us free will and warned us immensely against misusing it. Without free will we will be just robots.
9. Reckoning after death is an innate and a logical necessity, without it life will have no objective value or morals.
10. Atheists deliberately escape addressing the question: who is the cause of goodness, which we observe and enjoy in every aspect of this life?
11. Atheists persist on asking: why is there pain? Instead, we should ask them how can you explain having these intricate and mind-blowing delicate senses, which help you feel the pain? Who placed them in you?

Allāh, the Exalted, said: (And with Him are the keys of the unseen; non knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darknesses of the earth and no moist or dry [thing] but that it is [written] in a clear record.) (Noble Qur'āh 6:59)

Allāh, the Exalted, said: (Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection. So he who is drawn away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise, he indeed is successful. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion.) (Noble Qur'āh 3:185)

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[1] Anthony Flew, There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind (New York: HarperOne, 2007) p.13

[2] Dr. Sami Aamri, The Problem of Evil and Allah's Existence: Refuting Atheists Major Doubts, p.70-17 (An Arabic reference)

[3] Paul Bran and Philip Yancey, The Gift of Pain: Why we hurt and what we can about it.

[4] Ibid. p.12 – translated from Arabic

[5] Ibid. p.39 – translated from Arabic

[6] Ibid. p.219

[7] Dr. Sultan Alomari, The Phenomena of Criticizing the Religion in the Contemporary Western Intellect, v2/p.66 (An Arabic reference)

[8] John Clover Monsma, The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe (translated from Arabic)